

Brief Encounter

George Mackie and friends

Henry was an admirable man in his endeavours, however dreadful they became for his family. He **tried!** How few have the vision, however distorted as Henry's was, or the courage to do what he did. Your father's quality lay, at least **partly**, in his inability to protect himself. He was at best heroic, I think. A driven unhappy man, but an artist. He had something to say.

(Letter: George Mackie to Richard Williamson, 14.12.1993)

1. RICHARD WILLIAMSON

I became used to the unusual in those childhood days of the war. The grandest spectacles in the sky as bombers massed for departure to Germany; the variety (via service personnel) of British, Empire and American cultures and accents; the presence at the farm of artists, eccentrics and misfits, and a father who was as different to other village boys' fathers as it was possible to be.

Life was thrilling as far as I was concerned. But a comet across this starry background was the sudden appearance of Mackie. Yes, like Morse, he was just Mackie. I had no idea that it was his surname; rather, it seemed that he had immediately allowed us his nickname, and we were flattered.

Of course we were used to soldiers and airmen of all denominations: inside tanks, on parachutes, behind field guns, throwing candy from Jeeps (once, suspecting the world was magic, my hopes were confirmed when a marshmallow chocolate bar with the wrapper name O.HENRY, made by the Williamson Co. in the USA fell at my feet). But this one was different and spanned most known experiences. He was energetic and cheerful, so he was like the Yanks. Yet he conversed with father in the studio, so he was an artist. Yet he worked on the farm, understanding tractors, so he was not just another idealistic misfit. He was also able to talk to us children, so we thought of him as a friend. Above all, he flew a Fortress bomber, so he was exalted.

Like Alice and the White Rabbit, we could easily communicate with this extraordinary being. He had already made an exceptionally low run over the farm in his mighty black bomber: would he

please, the next time, stop one of the engines as a signal to us? He would; he did. Even three engines were enough to make every pantile of the roofs of the village vibrate together and the panes of leaded casements tremble. In the village school of Stiffkey children sitting at their desks were momentarily rendered uncontrollable in their excitement as they shouted: 'It's Mackie!' Windles, who was standing near the bridge below Camping Hill, saw the Fortress approach from between the Old Hall and the farm, fifty feet over the meadows and well below the trees. Mackie waved to him from the cockpit. Henry was pessimistic about his survival, and although he warned us never to suggest any such thing, he broke his own advice, not just in the national evening paper, but later on as part of a character in *Phasian Bird* and in *Lucifer Before Sunrise*.

But Mackie survived 44 ops. with only fairly minor wounds. He vanished as quickly as he had come, but like all comets, he returned and after a forty-year interval we met again. There, in the flying log he still had, were the Stiffkey runs, suitably under-recorded (see illustration).

But it was good to know a little more of the man who had helped us to slip through the mirror into those unforgettable days. After the war he returned to Scotland and became an artist and book designer. When he talked to me and in letters wrote a few of his experiences I began to understand perhaps why he had survived. There are good pilots, and there are brilliant pilots. The pilot who killed himself and his

navigator, James Farrar (*The Unreturning Spring*) was, one understands easily enough from what has been written, not in the latter category. It is easy to imagine Farrar and Mackie in the same Mosquito and the poems of Spring becoming the poems of Summer. Mackie's survival was not entirely luck, it was attention to detail: not resting on the automatic pilot, for example, thus gaining half a second's reaction time in the killing skies. Reading his all too brief accounts in letters and in the book *The Stirling at War* one is reminded of the mind of Stanford Tuck and Group Captain Cunningham.

That is a little background to Henry's sketchy character(s) in his three books: a brief encounter but a lasting memory.

D.F.C. FOR CUPAR OFFICER

Flying Officer George A. Mackie (24), son of Mr and Mrs D. G. Mackie, Monreith, Cupar, who has been awarded the D.F.C., was educated at Bell-Baxter School. Prior to joining up in 1940 he was a student at Dundee College of Art. His father was colonel and O.C. of 1st Fife Home Guard. Flying Officer Mackie, who has taken part in many operations against the enemy, in the course of which he has displayed the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty, was commissioned in 1943, after service in the ranks.

2. GEORGE MACKIE

However dangerous life was for aircrew on an average operational squadron in Bomber Command during the summer of 1944, it wasn't so bad in 214 Squadron. It had recently got rid of, to the delight of both air and ground crews, its inelegant and inefficient aeroplane called the Stirling, a name whose origins I have never understood. It was the first four-engined monoplane bomber in the Royal Air Force, absurdly if not criminally crippled in its development during the late thirties, by the Air Ministry having ten feet cut off the wingspan, to allow entry into 100 foot wide pre-war hangars. Aerodynamic considerations then required the undercarriage to be heightened alarmingly, causing multitudes of accidents throughout its brief and lethal career.

The replacement aeroplane, the American B17 or Fortress, was most agreeably different. Where it took off and landed with ladylike decorum, the Stirling got airborne angrily and was surly in landing. The higher the B17 went, and its ceiling was many thousands of feet more than the Stirling's, the sweeter its controls became. The higher the Stirling could be cajoled into flying, the more it wallowed.

The B17 was chosen for its ability to accommodate various, sometimes very bulky, electronic devices that were switched on when we accompanied the bomberstream over Germany and the occupied countries. One of their objects was to confuse and possibly destroy communications between night fighters and their controllers. But weeks went by with almost no operational flights by the squadron, probably because the bits and pieces of radar were slow in being installed. They were the very latest of their kind. While we keenly appreciated the luxury of not going out several times a week as the Lancaster squadrons, we chafed at the slowness of getting through, with luck, the required number of operational flights to complete a tour. For every hour in the air countless hours were wasted on the ground. In the almost bookless Mess I came across one called *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, which I read. I was after all in Norfolk. It was a relief from the repetitive chat, mostly shop, that went on day after day. The author was Henry Williamson, whose name I knew. I think I had some knowledge of his *Tarka*. I also think I had some garbled knowledge of his wayward politics. Otherwise nothing. The book's endpapers showed a plan of the farm, with its fields serpentine along a coastal road. There was a hamlet and a church and an old castle and a road with an arrow proclaiming Whelk-next-the-Sea, transparently Wells-

next-the-Sea, not very far from our airfield at Oulton, near Aylsham. I took up an aircraft soon afterwards and stooed along (to employ the slang of the time) the coastline at a thousand feet with the book open at its endpapers on my knee. After ten minutes there was the farm, unmistakable. The hamlet was Stiffkey. The month was July.

I was 24 and young for my age. Wartime flying did little to encourage maturity. But I had vague if callow aspirations that could indulgently be called intellectual. Reading the *New Statesman* every week and an occasional book wasn't enough. I wanted stimulus. I decided to meet Mr Williamson. Little did I know how electrical the stimulus was to be.

While they lived, aircrew had many privileges. Clean sheets, hot water, frequent leave, and on many stations little or no discipline other than their own, as a crew, within their aircraft. Many had cars, and a petrol allowance. Mine was an open Singer sports in which I entered the gravelled farmyard a week or so later. A woman answered the door to my knock. I asked if Mr Williamson was at home. After an unsmiling and defensive hesitation she said: 'He's repairing the bridge. You can see it a field away from the main road.' The door closed.

I found the field, with a cement mixer and a young man by a small stone bridge over a stream on its far side. He was no more welcoming. Mr Williamson would be back shortly, indicating a muddy track leading from the farm buildings. I retreated along it to a watery gap where it entered the adjoining field. I soon saw a car approach, pulling a trailer. It was an Alvis, the Silver Eagle of *The Story*. Henry Williamson, I supposed, was at the wheel, stripped to the waist despite the cold drizzle, with the hair on his chest all bristly, either from being shaved or close cropped. He impatiently waved me out of the way, not wanting to get stuck in the morass, as he said on jumping out of the car. He came up to me directly and said: 'Are you a poof?' Then, pulling aside the lapels of my greatcoat, he saw my pilot's wings and appeared satisfied.

I have wondered over my recollection of this incident. Did he really use the word poof? I shall never be certain. As an opening gambit it seems a little extreme. But he was living *in extremis*, I think, at the time.

My 52-year-old memories of a relationship with the Williamson household that lasted little more than two months are mixed; some are strong, others are faint, or void. I cannot now distinguish one from another my subsequent visits to the farm, perhaps half a dozen in all, or a few more. But my most certain, and grateful, memory is of feeling liberated

there. I found a warming antithesis to the ghastly bungalow in smalltown Scotland where I had lived with my taciturn father and his second wife. When Henry, white with rage, threw his plate of pudding flying across the kitchen, my stomach lurched as it never had over Germany; but how much better this piece of theatre than the sterile pantomime I knew at home. And in one hour in his writing den, after supper, in the old dovecot in the farmyard, he would talk with me more openly, and deeply, and passionately than my father had in my entire lifetime. I recall listening together one evening in the dovecot to Lord Haw-haw on the wireless, Henry making some point or other from time to time. I suppose I had a qualm or two, as one of His Majesty's officers on active service, but they were easily subdued. Even when it was intoned that Great Britain after the war would be nothing but an abandoned aircraft carrier lying off the shores of Europe; and so on. Henry (I use his forename now, I don't think I ever did then) was never explicit with me when talking politics; rather the talk was philosophical and I was flattered to listen to it. The corroding knowledge of the extermination camps was mercifully in the future.

Then there was also talk on a less exalted level. He spoke of neighbours, of women friends (he the pursued rather than pursuer), of an illegitimate child, and of a possible divorce, which he feared would damage his career as a writer. For despite his involvement in farming he continued to write. He had a weekly column in the London *Evening Standard*, wherein war-weary Londoners found solace reading of such things as the harvesting of sunflower seeds. They had also been reading about me in recent issues, as I discovered one day when I

drove into the yard after a longer than usual absence from the farm.

Henry was crossing it at the time and when he saw me, to my astonishment, he all at once clutched his head in his hands and began moaning. But he managed to recover quickly enough, and led me into the writing room where I was shown last week's article. I read of my death in action. He had killed me off, his young pilot friend. I wasn't in any way superstitious but even so, I didn't find the much exaggerated news of my death at all comforting.

Although the sky was seldom empty of the noise of aircraft I didn't usually find it difficult to forget the squadron and its irritations and boredoms and operational anxieties while I was at the farm. I helped with the harvest and drove the famous Ferguson tractor. I sported with the young boys and their sister Margaret whom I recall as being so beautiful (and so young) that I could scarcely look at her directly. On some of the many air tests that were needed to check the revolutionary electronic installations we carried I would drift along the coast and circle Stiffkey, when of course it became irresistible to beat up the farm, diving over the fields at fifty or a hundred feet. Low flying was an intoxication.

Time is curious stuff: Proust, Einstein, Williamson, they all understood. Although I knew the Williamson family for a very small amount of it in the late summer of 1944, it was more charged than I realised then. A brief encounter but the older I become, the more textured it seems. And in recent years I have discovered a kinship with Richard, the nine-year-old, who is now an ageing man amiable enough to share his memories of those lost days with an aged one.



Flying Officer George Mackie (centre) and fellow officers with the 'open Singer Sports'.



The 'Flying Fortress' B17 bomber, 214 Squadron, Oulton, 1944

3. ANNE WILLIAMSON

It is obvious that George Mackie made a great impression on HW as well as RLCW. HW wove Mackie into his writing, using him as a symbol in the same way, but not so obviously, as John Bullock. The young airman sacrificed. The pointlessness of war. Mackie himself tells us of his understandable superstitious fear that HW had foretold his imminent death in the article that appeared in the *Evening Standard*. I do not think he need actually have worried for I am fairly sure that it was not Mackie that HW was describing in the airman's death, but a death that had already happened. Interestingly Mackie (I only know him by this term of affection) does not recognise himself totally in the characters that HW eventually allotted to him in his books. But I recognise the description of a 'tall uniformed young man with blue eyes and fair hair' (*The Phasian Bird*) which is not a description of Mackie. He was certainly the basis of these characters and the Flying Fortress was *his* aircraft but there is a large element of A.N. Other. I feel certain from various mentions within HW's archive papers that HW was actually describing the death of Edward Seago's friend 'Crasher', Flying Officer Bernard Clegg, who was killed when his Spitfire crashed on the same day that *Peace in War* was published in June 1943. HW had stayed with them both in their cottage near Salisbury for about a week the previous summer (see biog. p. 242). There is a portrait of Bernard in Moat Cottage with

accompanying essay in *Peace in War*, and the book is dedicated to 'Crasher' (which one would not connect unless one knew). He was tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed. HW devoted the last part of his review of this book to a quiet tribute to the dead pilot (see HWSJ 31, p. 85). How unbearably sad it must have been for Ted Seago, and I hope he did not feel he had in some way pre-destined his friend's death by his dedication. I am sure that it is this death that HW took and used in the various books, weaving it into Mackie's personality.

4. HENRY WILLIAMSON

Thus began a friendship between two men which was to continue until death, and even beyond the chiaroscuro of terrestrial living. In the common standards of the contemporary world these two men should have been enemies, since belief in ideas constituting war by which men and women of both sides were tortured, broken, slain, drowned, and burned – manifestations of the agony of the split mind of western man in political conflict – was less than an inner faith they shared. Each gave of himself to the other, as men tried in battle afterwards share a wisdom which makes them immemorably wiser than the untried civilian who fights his enemy with words, and, when the flowers are growing upon the ruins of cities, hangs him with the logic of a pavement mind. . . .

*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus
Dominus Deus Sabaoth
Pleni sunt coeli et terra
gloria eius*

. . . *Through the continuous rolling reverberation in the darkness the choruses arose in antiphony, massively in two groups of three to a sustained harmony above the basses, above the organ diapason, above the roll of bombers, while the tremolo of trumpets was as a bird of beauty rising in radiant flight through the massed darkness which would destroy it . . .*

*Benedictus qui venit
in nomine domini*

. . . *When it was over, and the last bombers had gone far out over the sea – the night was quiet, the only sound was the voice of an evejar singing far away down the valley. . . .*

The nights were wholly twilight, dim with moths as the two friends wandered by the woods, or sat upon the high ground, watching the sea far away glimmering in the dusk; or they lay in armchairs within the studio, doors and windows open to the warm airs of the night, while the stars burned dimly over the valley; they spoke seldom, they understood one

another's thoughts, they shared the comradeship of peace. . . . It was the airman's last leave before he returned again to his basic operational unit. . . .

The aircraft were staggered in flight, one element above or below the other, and the squadrons were stepped up and splayed out into groups, and the groups into a wing, an aerial armada flying into the east . . . the captain was looking down at the remote and tiny outline of his friend's farm by the sea coast six miles below him, and thinking of the invitation he had received by post the day before, to spend Christmas Day in the farmhouse, to lie back in the leather armchair before a log fire in the open hearth, and hear on the gramophone the music of Bach, of Delius, of Wagner, of Elgar, of Beethoven and relax, relax, relax . . .

The leading bomber had its wheels down, and as it turned away from the others a red flare burned a bright arc through the air . . . It went down beyond the dark mass of the High Wood, and a moment later there came a prolonged rending crash, ugly and sullen as the thick black column of smoke rising into the dull day.

(The Phasian Bird, passim)